

ロスト・ユニバース①

幻夢 目覚める

神坂 一



富士見ファンタジア文庫

イラスト 義仲翔子

Lost Universe 1: Phantom Dream Awakening

By Hajime Kanazaka

Cover and Interior Illustrations by Shoko Yoshinaka

**Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
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The Brawl

"—Sorry, but could you say that one more time?"

As he spoke, Kane slowly rose from his stool at the bar counter. He was already more than ready for a fight.

"Looks like he didn't hear us too well."

"That's fine. I'll say it as many times as you want."

The men spoke up one by one, smirks plastered on their faces. There were four of them who had picked the fight. One of them stood a whole head taller than Kane, who himself was 180 centimeters.

A small tavern near a tiny spaceport on a backwater planet in the frontier. The kind of place where regulars—rough types who couldn't resist starting trouble with any stranger they laid eyes on—liked to hang around. That's exactly who had come after Kane.

"You're drinking straight whisky with that baby face of yours. Awfully cocky for a kid," the big man said, repeating the exact same words as before as he looked down at Kane.

"—And then that one said something else," Kane said, shifting his gaze to another man—the fattest of the bunch.

"Oh yeah, he did," the man answered in a grating, high-pitched voice. "That face of yours looks like a girl's, and that getup is weird. I bet you're a—"

THWACK!

Before the man could finish speaking, Kane's boot had buried itself in his face. A roar of cheers erupted through the tavern.

"You—you bastard!?"

The kicked man crumpled to the floor easily. The remaining three scrambled into fighting stances.

"Just how exactly is my getup weird!?" Kane shouted, sweeping his black cloak dramatically behind him. Apparently he either had no fashion sense or was completely oblivious to it. Or perhaps both.

"And one more thing! I don't know how it is on this planet, but as far as I'm concerned, scumbags and degenerates have no right to exist! Understood!?"

Kane had something of a short fuse. While plenty of people got rowdy after a drink, in his case, this was just how he was naturally.

"—What about lesbians!?" someone in the crowd called out irrelevantly.

But Kane answered without missing a beat: "They get a pass if they're cute!"

"Stop fooling around!" the big man bellowed, stepping forward.

The patrons irresponsibly egged both sides on.

"—Excuse me, customers—"

The moment the bartender opened his mouth—

CRACK!

Kane's kick, thrown in one explosive lunge, had shattered the big man's jaw. The man crumpled on the spot.

An even louder roar of cheers erupted.

"You bastard!?"

"Come on! You had it coming!"

Realizing they couldn't match him with their bare hands, the remaining two pulled switchblades from their back pockets and raised them.

—It was at this moment that the bartender quietly pressed the button to call the police—

"Oh-ho. So that's how it's going to be," Kane said with a relaxed grin.

"In that case, I won't hold back either! Come at me from any direction!"

"You asked for it! We'll cut you to ribbons!"

One of them charged, screaming. But Kane didn't panic. He sidestepped with a casual dodge. Somehow he'd slipped out of his cloak while no one was watching, leaving only the garment in place.

WHOOSH! The man charged straight into the cloak!

"Whoa!?"

"That's not a 'whoa'—!"

KICK! One kick on top of the cloak. Then another. And another.

...In the end... Kane kept kicking until the contents of the cloak stopped moving.

"...Brutal..."

"Pipe down!"

Responding to someone's muttered comment, Kane stripped the cloak off the man.

"The moment you drew a blade, this stopped being a 'fight' and became 'attempted murder'! That being the case, I have no obligation to go easy on you!"

He turned to face the last remaining man.

"—Now, you're the only one left."

"Yeah... I know..."

The man answered and began slowly shifting his grip on the knife—right hand, left hand—closing the distance between them millimeter by millimeter.

"...Oh-ho..."

Kane voiced his admiration.

"I thought that big oaf was the boss, but...you're actually pretty skilled, aren't you?"

"Find out for yourself...with your own eyes."

The man's feet stopped. He too had sensed it. Kane's true ability.

"Just so you know... you're going to pay for my cloak's dry cleaning bill..."

Kane pulled on the cloak he'd been stomping all over, took a slow half-step forward—and stopped.

A stare-down continued for a while. Murderous intent hung thick in the air. The rowdy spectators who'd been shouting from the sidelines all fell silent one by one, caught up in the atmosphere between the two men.

A moment of silence fell over the tavern.

And then—

...GULP...

Someone's throat gave a small sound.

In that instant, Kane took a step forward!

Before the man could react—

BANG!

"FREEZE! POLICE!"

Several officers burst through the tavern door, flooding in.

"...Oh. They Finally showed up."

Kane let out a sigh of relief without thinking.

But—

"—It's these people!"

The bartender said, pointing squarely at Kane.

"WHAT THE HELL!?"

Kane cried out involuntarily. Two officers who had rushed over grabbed both his arms.

"—Is it you!?"

"...W-wait a minute..."

"Quiet! Stop resisting!"

"NOOOOOO! I'M INNOCENT!"

Kane's entirely unfounded cries were in vain as two officers dragged him out of the tavern...

The holding cell smelled absolutely terrible.

The poor sunlight was understandable, but the floor and walls were plastered with mysterious stains, the toilet in the corner had run out of paper, and the bed sheets had turned a dirty gray.

He wanted to ask how many years it had been since the place was last cleaned, but feared the answer, so he refrained.

The meals served at breakfast and lunch were just barely a step above dog food.

"...Great... I really hope there aren't lice in this place..."

Whether it was his imagination or not, he felt a vague itching sensation, and he scratched at his head.

"...What the hell is wrong with the police here... locking up an innocent ordinary citizen in a place like this..."

...creak...

The sound of a door opening cut off Kane's endless grumbling, followed by two sets of footsteps approaching.

And—

"—Quite the vacation spot you've found, Kane."

Two people stood outside the iron bars. One was an officer who had arrested Kane the night before. The second was a man wearing a trench coat.

He looked a few years older than Kane. A handsome man with a sweet face and sleek black hair worn slightly long, which created something of an out-of-place impression.

"...Oh, it's you, Inspector Rail..."

Kane muttered, not looking particularly pleased.

"What business does the Interstellar Police have coming all the way out here? If you're here to poke fun at me, get lost."

He said curtly.

Rail Freymar. A young inspector of the Interstellar Police.

Working a job like trouble contractor—a general-purpose fixer—meant all sorts of requests came in. Nothing outright illegal, of course, but jobs that were one step from the afterlife weren't uncommon. Naturally, daily trouble never ceased.

It was through situations like those that Kane had previously become entangled with Rail in several incidents.

Certainly not as 'friends'—in Kane's words, a 'textbook rotten relationship.'

"...I'd appreciate it if you'd stop with the 'Inspector' honorific and the repeated 'Interstellar Police' every time..."

Rail said with a small smile.

"It only sounds like sarcasm."

"That's because it IS sarcasm."

At Kane's words, Rail gave a strained laugh.

"I'm not so free that I'd come all the way here just to tease a trouble contractor. —Excuse me, officer,"

He turned to the escorting officer.

"Do you mind giving us a moment alone?"

"Yes, sir!"

The officer—who clearly had a decade or so on Rail—gave a salute and disappeared at Rail's words.

"...Why is a local officer kowtowing to you from the Interstellar Police...?"

"He's probably the type who folds under authority."

Rail said, leaning against the wall across from the cell.

"Besides, I happen to know the warden here personally."

"...I see..."

"But Kane, you really outdid yourself this time. Three people sent to the hospital. That's a solid assault charge."

"Self-defense!"

Kane declared, looking away without a hint of shame.

"You threw the first punch?"

"Strike first, strike hard!"

"...Listen..."

"Regardless, they were the ones who picked the fight. Besides, some twentieth-century Earth publications explicitly stated that 'criminals have no rights.'"

"...No they didn't..."

Rail looked exhausted.

"...Anyway, I didn't come here to listen to your excuses. Let me get to the point. Kane. Do you want to get out of here?"

"...Out of here... huh..."

Kane eyed him with a suspicious squint.

"—Let me guess—there's a catch?"

"Obviously."

Rail said without hesitation.

"I have no obligation to help you out of pure kindness. In exchange, I need you to do one job for me. That's the deal."

"Payment?"

"Your freedom."

"Mine?"

"That's right."

Rail took a cigarette from his inside pocket and began turning it between his fingers.

"I told you, I know the warden personally. For something like a tavern brawl, I can probably get them to turn a blind eye."

"...Ha... that's not much of an offer."

Kane gave a small snort.

"I don't care what kind of job it is—getting saddled with something over a stupid bar fight is ridiculous."

"Oh-ho. But let me tell you, trials here take forever."

"...!"

"Even for minor incidents, it's normal for results to take one or two years. During that time, obviously you can't leave this planet. And of course, the docking fees for your shuttle at the spaceport and your spaceship at the satellite port keep adding up the whole time. ...Just that alone is a considerable expense, I'd think."

"....."

"On top of that, if you end up convicted, you're looking at a fine at minimum, or imprisonment at worst. That means even greater expenses. Compared to all those expenses and lost time, I'd say this deal is quite advantageous. At least, from where I stand."

"...You bastard..."

Rail completely ignored Kane's resentful glare.

"What do you say? Will you take the job?"

"...So... what's the job...?"

Kane asked reluctantly.

"Nothing to it, really. A simple case."

Rail produced a photograph from his breast pocket with a broad smile.

"Just a missing person."

It had been roughly four hundred years since humanity ventured out into the galaxy.

Through psychophysics—the physical application of mental energy, whose serious study had begun in the twenty-first century—humanity first exceeded the speed of light.

It goes without saying that humanity, drowning in overpopulation problems, rushed headlong into every corner of the galaxy.

Colony planets sprang up everywhere. Terraforming technology, cultivated through the transformation of Mars, expanded the habitable zone further.

And—just as no colony in Earth's history ever remained a colony, planet after planet declared independence one after another.

Thus the Galactic Union of humanity was founded, and the Space Calendar began.

...That said, no matter how far humanity advanced in psychophysics or how far they ventured into space, human nature itself didn't change. Pollution and environmental destruction persisted. Crime and conflict never ceased.

That's where space forces and the Interstellar Police came from—and people like Kane, jacks-of-all-trades.

Trouble contractors—given the nature of their work, often found themselves walking a very dangerous line, but unlike the space forces or Interstellar Police, they had no backing whatsoever. All they had to rely on were their own abilities and their ships.

Kane's ship, the Swordbreaker, was housed in a dock at the satellite port. His shuttle was docked underneath the Swordbreaker, oriented upside-down. Of course this shuttle was also Kane's. When tasked with transporting cargo, its presence was indispensable.

"Welcome back, Kane."

A clear voice greeted him as he reached the bridge. Standing at the center of the cockpit was a single girl.

She appeared to be sixteen or seventeen. Long, glossy silver hair and a lovely face—but before anything else, what caught the eye was her outfit: a cloak and robe covered in complex patterns, along with various ornaments.

Put simply, she looked like a shrine maiden straight out of a fantasy story.

Canal Vorfeed. The main control system of the Swordbreaker. She served as the ship's computer, but 'will' was perhaps a more accurate description. Her influence extended to the ship's toilets, but within the cockpit she held a three-dimensional holographic form.

"We're moving out. It's a job."

Kane said in a deliberately brusque tone as he settled into the pilot's seat.

"I know. Inspector Rail's fax arrived. ...But this looks like it could get dangerous again."

"It's just a missing person case."

"Just a missing person... you mean the one with organizational ties?"

...

A silence fell over the cockpit at Canal's words.

"...Huh!?"

Kane spun around with a confused expression.

"Not 'huh'—it was right there in the fax: 'Note: Creave Roberts is believed to have some connection to the Dugore Connection.'"

"WHAT!?"

Kane bolted toward Canal.

"Here."

Canal pointed to the display where text was floating. The final line read—

"—See?"

"....."

Kane was at a loss for words.

"The printout is in your room."

"...Th—that bastard!"

"...Could it be...you didn't hear him?"

"No, I definitely heard him! It's not that I didn't listen—he just didn't say it! What 'all we need to do is grab some rich daddy's runaway brat and haul him home'!? What a load of lies!"

"...Didn't you think something seemed off...?"

"...W-well...!"

Kane began making excuses under Canal's skeptical stare.

"When someone says 'a friend asked me, but since it's essentially just a runaway, and the guy's an adult, the police can't exactly get involved'... I thought, well, that happens, I guess..."

He must have realized even he couldn't call that an excuse, because his voice trailed off toward the end.

Canal let out a long sigh.

"...Well, we've already accepted, so there's nothing we can do. But consider this one favor owed to me. We'll have to ask Rail to add something on top of the commission."

"...About that..."

Kane mumbled.

He didn't want to say it. He really didn't want to say it—but staying quiet now would only get found out later.

"Something wrong?"

"...This job... the commission... there isn't one..."

"..... What!?"

Canal's eyes went blank.

After listening to Kane's account of everything up to that point with her eyes closed in silence, Canal's very first words were:

"Idiot."

"What!? What do you—"

"What do you mean—nothing!"

She even synthesized a voice that sounded exactly like Kane's "what do you mean" to throw it back at him.

"It's your fault for getting into a brawl in the first place! Don't drag me into your mess!"

"...I couldn't help it..."

Kane pouted like a sulking child even as he shrank back. Canal pointed sharply at him.

"Nothing 'couldn't help it' about it! Unless you can justify what you did without resorting to 'what's done is done', then try!"

"...Well... um..."

"But anyway!"

She continued without giving him room to think.

"What's done is done, that's a fact. Regardless, consider this one favor owed!"

"...O-okay..."

Kane nodded reluctantly.

"—Oh, that's right,"

Canal clapped her hands together with a snap. Oddly particular about details, her holographic form produced a sound effect of a clap out of nowhere.

"Before Kane forgets this debt—hey, Kane,"

She suddenly switched to a coaxing tone.

"Actually, there's something I'd like you to buy for me."

"...Something you want...?"

"Yes. There's a new product from Heckler Industries—an anti-air Phalanx particle cannon. The performance and design are both excellent. Four units to mount top and bottom on the left and right wings. Here's the catalog."

As she spoke, a nearby panel spat out a sheet of paper—a page from a weapons catalog, obtained from who knows where.

"Ugh."

The moment Kane saw the price, he was struck dumb.

"Nice, right? Buy them for me."

"...You... knowing we're not getting paid for this job, you want four of these ridiculously expensive things...?"

"...You won't buy them for me?"

Canal puffed out her cheeks.

"Come on, buy them! P-L-E-A-S-E! If you don't, I'll turn off the life support!"

...This little brat... one day I'm going to spill coffee on her circuit boards...

Even as he cursed her in his head, Kane reluctantly nodded.

"Fine, fine! Once this job is done, I'll buy them on some planet!"

"Thank you. Then that settles that,"

Canal smiled sweetly, then said:

"Now then, please complete the departure formalities. I'll handle the system check and course plotting. Our destination is—the solar system, correct?"

"Yeah. The back end of the frontier."

"It's the birthplace of humanity. ...It certainly is the frontier, though..."

The solar system had taken the biggest hit from the founding of the Galactic Union. All its notable resources had long since been stripped clean, and pollution had spread to the point where nature could not recover overnight.

Geographically, it offered no advantage as a transportation hub. No resources, a remote location, not enough natural beauty to become a resort.

Then colony planets suddenly started declaring independence one after another, taking their funding with them. The solar system deteriorated rapidly, and now it was nothing more than one frontier star zone.

Currently, humanity lived on Earth, Mars, and a few space colonies in the solar system. Their destination this time: Mars.

"All systems normal. Course set: Galactic area 1-3-A, Solar System. Setting complete."

"Departure procedures complete. Dock eleven, Swordbreaker departing."

'Okay. Dock eleven, gate opening.'

With the transmission from the control tower, the mooring hooks locking the hull released, and the gate slowly opened up and down.

Beyond it spread—

With a blue planet to their left, a boundless void filled with countless stars—

From inside the dock into a sea of weightlessness, the Swordbreaker gradually revealed its full 210-meter form.

"Swordbreaker to control tower. Departure from dock complete. Thank you for your cooperation."

'Acknowledged. Bon voyage.'

Canal's voice was answered by the controller's.

"Swordbreaker—"

Kane's voice rang through the cockpit as his fingers ran over the control panel. The engines stirring conveyed a faint vibration.

"GO!"

Now—

The Swordbreaker launched into space.

Mars

"So—" Kane stretched after finishing all his adjustments and settings. He glanced back at Canal, who stood behind him.

"Still time before we can enter phase-transition range?"

Phase-transition drive—in short, faster-than-light travel.

"Yes. At our current speed, it will be approximately eight standard hours."

Standard time was based on Earth's, and even now that humanity's homeland had become a backwater planet, it remained the common benchmark.

"Understood. Keep the speed as is. In the meantime, pull up data on Mars and...what was it again? The organization connected to this job..."

"The Dugore Connection."

"Right. Gather as much on them as you can."

"Understood. For now, sit in the spare seat and have some coffee."

"Okay."

Kane rose from the pilot's seat and moved to the spare seat just behind Canal. The surface of the mini-desk beside the seat opened, and a mug of steaming coffee rose up. Of course it was black and scalding hot, just the way he liked it.

While he relaxed, Canal's form had disappeared.

"...An organization... I really don't want to get mixed up with one of those..."

Kane muttered, mug in hand.

"—One option is to just deck that Creave brat, drag him away, and haul him back... that way everything goes smoothly..."

He meant it literally.

By the time the coffee was half gone, Canal reappeared.

"Getting detailed data on the Dugore Connection will take a little time—I need to forcibly break into local police computers."

"Hmm."

Kane casually brushed off Canal's matter-of-fact announcement of a blatant crime. His personal philosophy: as long as it doesn't cause trouble for others, what's the harm?

"For now I have general info on Mars and the Dugore Connection. Want to hear it?"

"Just the organization. Print out the Mars data for me later."

"Understood. The Dugore Connection: founded by Duras Dugore, based on the fourth planet of the solar system, Mars. A criminal organization whose influence extends throughout the solar system. Duras died twelve years ago. Now his son, Darles Dugore, runs things. Currently—"

Canal paused, unusually furrowing her brow slightly.

"—Currently, presumed to be in conflict with the criminal syndicate 'Nightmare', which is believed to be planning to move into the same solar system—"

"Nightmare!?"

Kane couldn't help but cry out. Few in the galaxy hadn't heard that name—the largest criminal organization in the galaxy, bar none. On the surface, it operated as a corporate group called the Geizer Conglomerate. Until four or five decades ago, they'd apparently been a normal company. While it wasn't uncommon for large corporations to become entangled with crime syndicates, resulting in a hostile takeover, here the corporation itself had spawned the criminal organization. Because the current ruler of Nightmare, Albert Von Stargazer, was none other than the son of the Geizer Conglomerate's founder.

Why he had chosen a criminal syndicate over a corporation, and how he'd risen to the top criminal organization in the galaxy—nobody knew.

Regardless, Kane knew one thing for certain: they were firmly in the top five of people and organizations he never wanted to encounter.

"...So 'Nightmare' is... doing what?"

He steadied himself and prompted Canal to continue.

"The Dugore Connection is currently in a standoff with Nightmare. Nightmare overwhelms them in overall power, but appears to be unable to launch a full-scale offensive, likely out of fear of Interstellar Police intervention."

"...That tracks..."

He could send in a ship or two, a few dozen assassins under the guise of leisure or business. But anything beyond that, and the Interstellar Police wouldn't stay quiet. In the worst case, the space military could be deployed at the Interstellar Police's request.

So they had no choice but to hit with a small, elite force. But even if the Dugore Connection was just a frontier organization, a handful of ships and a few dozen assassins couldn't do much.

"—By the way, Canal," Kane said conversationally, raising his mug.

"What do you know about Nightmare?"

After a brief silence,

"—It's the largest criminal organization in the galaxy—"

"That's not what I'm asking."

He cut her off.

"I don't mean textbook stuff. The moment Nightmare's name came up, you hesitated—and that's not like you. Maybe there's something only you know."

The two stared at each other for a moment. After a while, it was Canal who looked away first, giving a small shake of her head.

"...Not yet. I can't talk about it..."

"—Alright."

Kane nodded simply. If she judged it that way, that was enough for him.

"Anyway, print out the detailed data on the Dugore Connection when it comes in."

Kane stood.

"Where are you going?"

"My room. I'll shower and sleep. I barely slept last night in that holding cell. Wake me when we reach phase-transition range."

"Understood. Rest well."

After confirming Kane had entered the residential section, Canal opened the interstellar communication channel.

Rail received the interstellar call in his hotel room. Not a business hotel—a first-class establishment.

"...Interstellar communication?"

He furrowed his brow slightly at the front desk's relay. Events in some incident or another ruining his vacation—that happened. An occupational hazard. But—

"From the spaceship Swordbreaker. You have a Video call."

"...Kane, is it?"

He smiled slightly.

"Put it through."

After a brief pause, the video comm on the wall chimed. Rail turned it on.

"...Oh..."

Seeing the face on the screen, he couldn't help but groan. On the display, smiling away, was not his expectation, but a single lovely girl.

"Long time no see. This is Canal from the Swordbreaker."

"...It wasn't Kane..."

Rail muttered, loosening his collar.

"No. Kane is busy right now. That's why I wanted to discuss the commission for this job with you."

"Didn't Kane tell you?"

Rail asked with a cold smile. Canal's face clouded.

"...He did, sort of, but it wasn't entirely clear... If he wasn't lying, it sounds like he agreed to take this job in exchange for you quietly making his bar brawl disappear with your connections."

"That's about right."

"...I don't know what sort of fight Kane got into, but was it the kind that could result in charges?"

"Well, the other party is in the hospital."

Rail answered in an easy tone as Canal stared at him worriedly.

"—Well, well."

But in that instant, Canal's attitude changed completely. She said in a suddenly cheerful tone:

"So in short, you used your local police connections to turn a blind eye to a crime, in exchange for having someone do a job. That makes it abuse of authority, aiding a criminal—and extortion too, wouldn't you say? Yep, that's more than enough to get you fired from the Interstellar Police."

"You have no proof!"

Rail raised his voice involuntarily. But Canal just smiled sweetly.

"...You do realize I've been recording this call?"

"—!"

Rail was stunned. But at this point, the damage was already done.

"So, about the commission—including payment for my silence, ten thousand credits..."

"WHAT!?"

"—but since Kane was at fault too, I'll be generous: five thousand."

"Still way too high!"

"...Four thousand then..."

"Two thousand at most!"

At Rail's words, Canal smiled and nodded.

"Understood. Two thousand it is. I'll send you my account number later. Please wire it there. Thank you very much~"

The screen faded out, leaving only the smiling afterimage.

"—Wait, two thousand is almost double the going rate..."

Alone in the hotel room, Rail muttered in a daze.

Kane returned to the cockpit about eight hours later.

"Almost time?"

"Almost. We entered phase-transition range five minutes ago."

Canal answered cheerfully, giving no hint of her backroom dealings with Rail.

"Course and engine check done. Just waiting for your order."

"Understood. Let's go—"

Kane settled into the pilot's seat and ran his fingers over the control panel.

"Phase-transition system, activate! Course: Galactic coordinates 1-3-A, Solar System!"

"Understood. Activating phase-transition system."

Vmmm...

A low vibration filled the cockpit, and the space shown on the main display began to glow pale blue. Soon, the stars began to blink—space itself was warping.

LURCH!

In an instant, all the stars on the display vanished, and a strange pressure assaulted Kane's body for a moment. All that remained on the screen was pale blue darkness.

"Entry into faster-than-light space complete. All systems normal. Estimated arrival at target zone: approximately thirty standard hours."

Canal spoke in a businesslike tone.

"...A day and a bit..."

Kane rose from his seat and headed for the door to the residential block.

"I'm going to eat something and sleep..."

"Again?"

Canal looked exasperated.

"What are you saying,"

Kane said with a completely straight face:

"Lounging around sleeping all day is a man's dream."

"...That seems kind of... rotten, actually..."

"You think so?"

"Anyway, at this rate your mind and body will go soft. How about some exercise... or I could play chess with you? Level 2, to be fair?"

"...No thanks..."

Kane made a face.

"...I've been meaning to ask for a while—when we play chess, do you secretly raise the difficulty when you're about to lose? You suddenly get way harder sometimes..."

—Sharp—

A human might have broken into a cold sweat, but Canal said perfectly calmly:

"I wouldn't do that. Level 2 has intentionally different thinking patterns in the first and second halves. That's why it feels that way."

"...Is that so... Anyway, food first. I'll be in the kitchen, give me whatever menu you like."

"Understood."

As she watched Kane disappear through the door, Canal thought to herself with a quiet smile:

—Good... looks like he hasn't noticed the card-game cheating...

Vmmm...

As the low vibration hum faded, the main display was stained with darkness, and then stars appeared.

"Drive-out to normal space complete. All systems green. Confirming interstellar coordinates. Confirmed: outer solar system, Galactic Area 1-3-A."

"So this is humanity's birthplace..."

Kane murmured.

"—Kane,"

Canal's voice broke through his small moment of sentiment.

"Radar contact. Eleven vessels. If we continue on this heading, we'll pass close by."

"Send them a polite greeting."

He said lazily, but she shook her head.

"...That's the thing, something seems off... According to registration verification, they're listed as a Lucreus Company transport fleet and escort vessels... but the energy readings are unusually high."

"What do you mean?"

Kane straightened up.

"Like they're transporting energy material?"

"No, it's not that kind of reading. ...More like... combat vessel readings."

"—Can you put it on a monitor?"

"Yes. Putting it on secondary display two."

As Canal answered, one of the sub-displays showed a single spacecraft.

"First, this is the escort vessel—"

The image was clear for the distance.

"A Lucreus Company 200-meter-class escort vessel. Heavily armed."

The monitor switched again to show a boxy ship that looked like nothing more than an engine bolted onto a crate.

"This is also a Lucreus Company 400-meter-class transport vessel—supposedly. But it's a type not in the existing database."

Her expression clouded.

"Aren't you overthinking it?"

"...Maybe..."

Canal gave an ambiguous answer.

"...But Lucreus Company is a firm with ties to the Dugore Connection. Of course, it might just be a coincidence, but..."

"...Hm..."

Kane folded his arms.

"—Hold on. We're getting a voice communication from them. Connecting."

After a brief pause, a blunt male voice came through the speaker.

'—This is Lucreus Company Fourth Transport Division representative, escort vessel Uranus. We wish you safe travels.'

The standard exchange between passing spacecraft. Kane also switched on the comm.

"—This is Trouble Contractor Kane Blueriver, Swordbreaker. We wish you safe travels."

He finished the formality and cut the comm.

"—What do you want to do, Kane? We'll pass in about sixty seconds. Incidentally—we'll be within range of that escort vessel's weapons in about thirty seconds."

"...Might be worrying for nothing, but..."

Kane let out a small sigh.

"...Something does feel off. Prep the barriers for deployment. —And keep a constant monitor on the escort and transport vessels."

"Understood. Electromagnetic barrier prep—"

"—No."

Kane cut Canal off.

"The Psi-barrier."

She made a puzzled face for a moment, but reading something in Kane's expression:

"—Understood. Psi-barrier prepared. Five seconds to escort vessel range—"

Kane stared at the monitor. The escort vessel showed no movement.

"—Within escort vessel range. No enemy movement."

Canal let out a breath of relief.

"...Looks like I was overthinking it after all..."

"—Not yet."

Kane murmured.

"—What?"

"Hold status. The bad feeling won't go away."

"—Understood. Ten seconds to passing."

Kane kept his eyes fixed on the monitor.

"Five seconds—"

That's when it happened. The change came from the transport vessel.

Like a balsam pod bursting, the outer hull blew off with a pop.

—Did it explode?—

For a moment, Kane thought so. But he was wrong. What emerged from the hull's absence were ten large combat vessels—already with gun turrets aimed this way!

"Deploy barrier!"

Kane shouted, grinding his teeth inwardly. The transport vessel had been camouflage—combat ships disguised with a fake outer hull.

"Understood! Barrier deployed!"

Before Canal's words ended—

A shockwave rocked the Swordbreaker's cockpit.

All gun ports opened simultaneously, and space blazed white.

That was precisely where the Swordbreaker had been a moment ago.

"Nearly all shots direct hits!"

The helmsman's report caused the captain of the Uranus to curl the corner of his mouth.

Particle cannons, missiles, magnetic projectiles—every weapon they had, fired at point-blank range. Even with a powerful electromagnetic barrier deployed, there was no way it could hold.

"Ha. Easy work. Coming out alone like that with just one ship. What did they think they could accomplish?"

He muttered with a sneer.

But—

"Enemy vessel still operational!"

The helmsman's report—almost a scream—wiped the smile from his face.

"—Impossible!?"

Against the dark starfield, the silhouette of the Swordbreaker appeared sharply on the screen.

"Impossible! That can't be!"

As far as he knew, no barrier capable of withstanding that attack existed.

"...W-what do we do, Captain...?"

But the helmsman's panicked question found no answer.

"Damage report!?"

Canal's voice answered Kane instantly.

"—All systems normal! ...However..."

"What!?"

"We exceeded the shock absorption system's capacity, so... most of the dishes and tableware are broken..."

"...THOSE BASTARDS!? What is going on? Why attack us all of a sudden!?"

"Who knows... So what do we do? Counterattack?"

Kane thought for a moment.

"—No. We run."

"Understood. Releasing barrier! Boosting engine output! ...Although it's unusual for you to take the cautious route."

"If we recklessly destroy them and get arrested by the police again, that's a problem."

"I see. So you do know the word 'reflection' after all."

"...What exactly do you think I am..."

"Enemy fleet turning! They're giving chase!"

Canal switched back to business without missing a beat.

"Dammit! They're persistent!"

"Incoming fire from behind!"

Too late to evade!

"Cut engines! Redeploy Psi-barrier!"

"Understood!"

Another impact, followed by another shockwave—less severe than the previous one, but still enough to sink any ordinary ship.

"I'll handle evasion. Concentrate on Psi-barrier maintenance! Reduce output when fire is thin, maximize when it's heavy!"

"Understood! Counting on you."

Kane nodded silently. There were moments when the barrage thinned—but pinpointing those was impossible for a computer, and naturally for any human either.

In short, luck and instinct were all they had.

BOOM! Another shockwave rocked the Swordbreaker.

And then—

"GO!"

Kane shouted. The Swordbreaker's hull pitched down and right, and the barrier vanished almost simultaneously. The engines produced a blueish-white glow.

"Enemy fleet still firing..."

CRACK!

A dull sound and shockwave cut through Canal's words!

"—Did they hit us!? Damage!?"

"Port upper surface! Just grazed by a particle beam! Damage minimal!"

"Understood! Maintain acceleration!"

Leaving a contrail of engine light in the darkness, the Swordbreaker accelerated at beyond-rational speed. The distance between it and the pursuing fleet grew. The barrage continued, but not a single shot came close.

"Outside enemy weapons range! ...Firing still continuing."

"They're just shooting blind. Ignore it. ...Let's push straight on! To Mars!"

The Swordbreaker arrived at the satellite port on Phobos—Mars's moon—roughly sixteen hours later.

Intent to stay. Purpose: tourism.

When he stated his purpose, the young male controller, not hiding his suspicious look on the video comm, said:

'...Understood. But just what happened? Those battle scars on the hull... clearly looks like combat.'

Kane was lost for words. There was no way he could say 'we got into a firefight with a mystery fleet around Pluto.' Absolutely no way.

After a moment of silence, Canal interjected from the side:

"...You know, it does stand out."

She said with a wry smile in a conversational tone.

"You remember the incident in the Rubas star zone about half a year ago? The Interstellar Police and organization skirmish? Remember that?"

'Oh, right...'

On the display, the controller smiled, seeming taken with Canal.

"We happened to get caught up in it... stray shots. The insurance company said 'leave the damage as is for the investigation', so here we are."

'...Well, insurance companies are like that...'

"...We got the claim settled a while ago, so I was thinking of getting repairs done somewhere..."

'Then why not get them done here while you're at it?'

"...Good idea. Shall we, Kane?"

"...Yeah. Sounds good."

He played along.

Pleasantries exchanged, the controller—who had clearly developed a thing for Canal—cut the comm reluctantly after some idle chat.

"That controller... seemed to fancy you,"

Kane teased.

"Hmm,"

Canal brushed it off.

"I suppose it's this appearance... but then men are sad creatures..."

"Don't say that with such feeling, coming from you! And more to the point—did you track down who attacked us?"

"Oh, that... looks like they've covered their tracks. The escort vessel Uranus and ten combat ships all have theft reports filed."

"Theft!?"

Kane cried out.

"...How do you even steal something like that...?"

"I'll need to investigate more for details, but according to the company's official story, they were stolen during the confusion of scrapping procedures."

"...But the bigger problem is why they suddenly came after us in the first place."

"Mistaken identity... or maybe it really was pirates who stole the ships and we were just a random target."

"Or maybe it's someone from a past case bearing a grudge."

The two fell silent for a moment.

"Well, we can't figure it out sitting here..."

"That's true... Anyway, I'll go ahead."

"Be careful. Down on the surface, I can't protect you. ...Try not to get into trouble with local organizations. For precaution, bring some self-defense weapons. Oh, do you have your communicator? Handkerchief?"

"...Am I in elementary school...?"

"Anyway, take care."

"Yeah."

He raised a hand and left the cockpit.

Past the residential corridor to the end, there was a hatch leading to the shuttle.

"—Mars—"

He murmured quietly, then opened the hatch door.

Arba City. Originally it had been the first observation base after Mars was terraformed, but now it was the planet's largest city.

The spaceport Kane landed at was near the city.

"—Hmm—"

He bounced lightly two or three times.

"...Feels quite different..."

Compared to the pseudo-gravity generator aboard the Swordbreaker maintaining 1G—the same as Earth's gravity—Mars's gravity was roughly half that. It was like suddenly having his body weight cut in half.

First, he checked into a nearby budget hotel. Locked himself in the room and began preparation for his mission. He needed some operating funds—credit card, plus cash. The map Canal had given him had marked every company and business with ties to the Dugore Connection in the area.

Also—the target was a dangerous organization. He couldn't forget to arm himself.

He wrapped a narrow bandana-like band in his hair, and clipped a small box at his waist. In his pocket: a metal cylinder about 20 centimeters long. All of these were connected by thin cords.

A Psi-Blade. Another product of psychophysics—it extracted mental energy from the bandana, amplified it via the waist amplifier, and manifested it as an energy sword through the metal cylinder.

Its main advantage was its energy source: as long as the user remained conscious and battle-ready, it never ran out of power.

Also, the manifested blade could be fired as a projectile, like an energy gun.

But of course, it had drawbacks. In terms of lethality, a conventional gun had the advantage on the ground. And perhaps the biggest reason this Psi-Blade system never became widespread—the bandana and amplifier were, putting it kindly, not exactly stylish.

Using a Psi-Blade without the bandana and amplifier was theoretically possible, but required extraordinary mental power and concentration—practically impossible for any human.

Nowadays, Psi-Blades survived only among certain white-infantry units of the space military and a handful of enthusiasts.

And here was one such enthusiast. Not that Kane's black cloak was any less conspicuous—most people would look at that first.

He also packed a tiny camera and cassette recorder camouflaged as a lighter and cigarette box. His watch contained a communicator to stay in contact with Canal at the satellite port.

He didn't really want to owe her more, but here they were.

Everything stashed in his pockets, he was ready to go.

"...First... I'll work the bar district. ...A bit early, but..."

He had two of the hostesses beside him and was halfway through his fifth whisky before Kane snapped back to reality.

—Wait, I was actually serious about drinking!

"—So, random question, but do you know this guy?"

Putting on a deliberately flippant tone, he pulled a photo from his breast pocket and showed it to the two girls beside him.

Creave Roberts. Around twenty years old. A resentful, grudging gaze—as though the whole world owed him something—stared out from the photo.

"This guy owes me money and ran. I need to find him and give him one good punch."

The two girls looked at the photo in turn.

"...Don't know him. He looks gloomy."

"Me either. Oh, can I have another drink?"

"Sure! Keep it coming!"

Kane spurred them on pointlessly. In the end, he didn't leave until the three of them had emptied two bottles.

"...Alright... on to the second bar..."

He looked up at the now-darkened sky, feeling mildly guilty.

"...Do you know this man?"

The middle-aged bartender glanced at the photo without stopping his glass-polishing.

"—Don't see you around here."

He asked, expression unchanged.

"Yeah, I'm not local."

Kane slid a few credit bills across the bar, discreetly.

The bartender took them without changing expression, then said:

"See him sometimes. Not a regular, but he comes in. If he shows up again, I'll let you know. —Where can I reach you?"

"—No—"

He nearly gave the hotel name but caught himself.

He didn't know if this bartender was friend or foe. He couldn't carelessly reveal his location.

"Sorry, I move around a lot. I'll come back."

He left the drink money and a tip on the counter and stood.

"At least give me a name."

The words came from behind. He stopped, then:

"—Kane. Kane Blueriver."

He left the words behind, pushed open the door.

Of course—Kane didn't know. That one of the customers had been watching him the whole time. Or that the bartender had hurried into the back room and reached for the phone.

"—Looking for someone, are you?"

A man spoke to him on the second night of his asking around.

The smell of cigarette smoke and alcohol. Grating, tuneless music.

A bar that looked thoroughly seedy—which meant it was a good place to gather all kinds of information.

He'd just settled onto a stool at the counter when the voice came from beside him.

About thirty years old, he guessed. Stubbled face behind round sunglasses. Crumpled coat, wild black hair clearly not combed in ages.

"—And you are?"

Kane asked warily. The man replied in an utterly casual tone:

"Doesn't matter who I am. More importantly, I might be able to help you. —Of course, it depends on your wallet."

He gave a low laugh. An informant.

"But—you know awfully fast that I'm looking for someone. I'm only on day two."

"You stand out."

"I do? How?"

"...Come on... who wears a suspicious cloak like that dragging on the floor and doesn't stand out?"

Kane said indignantly:

"'Suspicious' is a bit much. 'Has originality', or at least 'shows a glimpse of conviction'..."

"Yeah yeah. Very original. —Now let's skip to the point."

Kane nearly got a vein in his forehead, but composed himself and pulled out a photo:

"Name's Creave Roberts. Know him?"

The man paused, scratching his overgrown stubble.

"—That'll be fifty credits."

"...Come on..."

Kane sighed.

"It's not like he's a wanted criminal. Isn't that too high?"

"Take it or leave it."

...This guy's taking advantage of me being new in town...

He nearly just paid, but the thought of the commission suddenly crossed his mind. Kane still believed this job was unpaid.

"...That's the thing, I'm tight on funds this time..."

Now the informant started to panic.

"...Hey, come on... don't have it...?"

He thought for a moment.

"—Alright, forty."

Still too high.

"...Like I said, I'm on a tight budget..."

"Dammit! Thirty!?"

Ignored.

"Ugh! Twenty! Deal at twenty, come on."

"...That's what I'm saying, I really don't have the budget..."

"ARGH! FIFTEEN! That's my limit!"

...Hmm...?

A question crossed Kane's mind.

"How about this. Ten credits."

Kane looked reluctant, then slowly pulled a ten-credit bill from his pocket. The informant's hand reached out—but Kane didn't hand it over yet.

"—So? Where is he?"

"He's always wandering around, so... I'll take you."

The informant snatched the bill from Kane's hand. Kane rose from his stool.

...Just as I thought...

After walking for about ten minutes, the informant led them into alleys with sparse streetlights, away from the bustle of the entertainment district.

When they finally stopped in a run-down alley, there was no bar in sight—just the dark hulks of old buildings.

"Here it is," the informant said.

From the shadows of the buildings, several men appeared. Three ahead, three behind.

"—Hmm—"

The informant scurried to the three ahead. Kane smiled quietly.

"Sorry about this. It's just business."

"No worries. I knew something like this was coming—that's why I followed."

"Brave talk for one man, huh?"

One of the men ahead—with height alone surpassing Kane—spoke in a raspy voice.

"Brave? Not really... it seemed like this informant really wanted to sell me information no matter what, so I figured..."

"Oh? Even knowing all this, you came along. Must be quite confident in your abilities. But—"

The man moved his right hand behind his back.

"—This sort of thing—"

SLASH!

Before the man finished speaking, white light split the night.

THUD. A moment later, a heavy sound.

There on the ground—a black pistol.

The moment he saw the man reaching for a gun, Kane closed the gap in an instant and slashed the tendons in the man's arm with his Psi-Blade. Only Kane himself could have understood that movement.

"—AAGHHH!"

The man finally screamed. The others finally understood what had happened. But by then, Kane had already moved.

...THUD...

Two men hit the ground before the first man's initial scream had faded. One punch to the solar plexus, one kick to the back of the head. With the Psi-Blade's blade retracted, those were Kane's only two moves.

Then three punches to the informant's gut—deliberately missing the vitals so he wouldn't pass out on the first hit.

"—Consider that your information fee. Keep it."

"...Y-you're holding a grudge..."

The informant groaned, bent double.

Overwhelmingly powerful—but environment played its part too. The difference in strength and speed between someone who had lived in twice the gravity of these men.

Three remained!

But those three already had guns drawn. There was too much distance to charge in and swing a blade.

Kane aimed the Psi-Blade emitter at the men and imagined a burst of light.

VHEW!

A beam of light shot out and pierced through the gun arm of one man!

"AUGH!?"

"What!? What IS that!?"

"He's got a laser gun!"

One shouted and immediately turned tail. The other two followed without hesitation.

"...Not professionals... abandoning their comrades to run..."

Kane murmured without even trying to give chase.

He turned to the man clutching his arm and groaning.

"Why did you come after me?"

"I d-don't know!... I was just told to take care of anyone who showed up... that informant brought the tip!"

"The Dugore Connection?"

Kane murmured quietly. But why?

"Some organization member! I don't know names—small fry like us don't get told! Disobeying or asking too many questions just shortens your life!"

Kane studied the man's eyes. He saw fear there. He probably did know the name. But he'd never say it, knowing the organization's retaliation.

...Fine...

Kane let go easily.

"—One more thing: give me back the ten credits."

Millinium

"...What a terrible job I took on..."

Kane murmured to himself in the bathtub.

After calling Canal with an update, he was enjoying a rare moment of downtime at the hotel.

"But what exactly is this Creave...?"

He took a sip of thoroughly chilled cola.

He liked soaking in a lukewarm bath while drinking cold cola. Canal called it "old-fashioned."

According to Rail's report, the boy's father was a local representative on some planet. Not exactly powerful, but had some money.

Could they be trying to make Creave a cash cow for the organization?

He mulled it over, but there were too few clues.

...RING...

He finally noticed the phone had been ringing for a while.

He climbed out of the tub, threw a robe directly over his wet body, and went to the room to answer.

"—Hello."

'Front desk.'

A deep male voice. The gruff, always-glum hotel owner—Kane pictured him at the front desk.

'You've got a call from outside.'

A call without giving a name—just asking to keep ringing. The phone switched before he could answer.

'—You're there, I see.'

From the receiver came a young woman's voice.

"Who is it? I don't take cold calls or religious solicitations."

'Don't treat me like some suspicious person! More importantly—you've been sniffing around about Creave Roberts.'

"...That phrasing is itself pretty suspicious, you know..."

'Never mind that! Anyway—stop poking around in his business.'

"...Hang on..."

Kane's tone sharpened slightly.

"Was it you who had those people attack me today?"

'..... What?'

The voice that came back was quite drawn out. Apparently not her.

"—Okay, not you. But then why do you want me to back off?"

'I don't know why you're digging around in his business, but it's making things really difficult on my end.'

"I was just asked to bring back a kid who ran away from home."

'Then leave it to me. I won't let anything bad happen to him.'

"...A private detective, by any chance? Hired by his father?"

Silence on the other end.

'—Why did you figure that out!?'

...Why answer honestly...

"...Are you ever told you're 'not cut out for detective work'?"

'Mind your own business!'

Apparently she'd hit a nerve again.

'Anyway! Stay out of it, amateur! Hanging up!'

She announced it honestly, then hung up.

"...I'd say she's far more of an amateur than me..."

Kane muttered, staring at the receiver emitting a dial tone.

"Creave? Oh, he's usually at 'Minos'."

The answer he wanted came on the fifth night.

It came so easily that Kane almost asked again. Not without reason—this could still be a trap. There was precedent.

"Minos?"

"Yeah. A bar on Eleventh Street. Small place."

The man—barely twenty—said and smirked.

"I see. Thanks."

Kane offered several credit bills, but the man reached out not for the money but toward Kane—

—For his rear end.

—A man who liked men.

Thud. In an instant, Kane's elbow had shattered the man's jaw.

"—Thank you for your cooperation."

He saluted the collapsed man and walked away.

Opening the door, the smell of cigarettes and alcohol hit him.

The patrons glanced at Kane for a moment, then returned to their own affairs. All of them were shady-looking characters. Kane in his black cloak was hardly normal, but at least here, that was beside the point.

...Figured... nice place for that type of crowd...

He murmured under his breath and moved into the bar.

He didn't spot the right man at a glance.

"—Hey—"

He settled at the counter, ordered a straight shot, then asked the bartender:

"There's a guy named Creave who comes here—Creave Roberts. Know where he is?"

He expected pushback, but the bartender just glanced toward a corner of the bar without a word.

Four punk-style young men there.

"...Oh..."

Kane raised his voice involuntarily.

One of them. Changed in looks, but that resentful, blame-the-whole-world stare was unmistakable.

Creave Roberts.

Kane walked straight toward them, glass in hand.

Standing beside Creave, he said in an exaggeratedly sarcastic tone:

"Hey, Creave. Who'd expect the local representative's precious son to be playing outlaw out here?"

Creave's face changed color instantly.

"—Who the hell are you?"

Three companions rose.

"...Hold on."

Creave himself stopped them.

"Let me talk to him alone."

They exchanged uncertain looks.

Creave nodded and faced Kane. '—Let's go to the back.'

"Fine by me."

They moved to the bar's toilet—not elegant, but convenient for a private conversation.

"—Why?"

Creave spoke first, with faint fear in his eyes.

"Why is Nightmare looking for me!?"

A brief silence fell—

"...Huh?"

Kane gave a blank response.

"...What are you talking about?"

"Stop playing dumb!"

Creave cried, almost a scream.

"Word got around you've been asking about me and now it's getting dangerous for me! Some people are straight-up calling you a Nightmare spy! And I've got people from above watching me now!"

After his outburst, Creave breathed hard.

Kane was silent for a moment, scratching his head.

"...So... how does Nightmare come into this?"

"Stop acting innocent! You're from Nightmare, aren't you!?"

"..... Huh?"

Kane's eyes went blank.

"—Hold on, why would I be Nightmare?"

"That's what everyone's saying!"

"I am NOT! I'm just here because someone asked me to bring you back home!"

"Liar!"

"It's true!"

"Prove it!"

"I CAN'T!"

"See!"

"Then do YOU have proof I'm from Nightmare!?"

"Ugh... I... I don't know!"

"Right!"

A standoff, children's argument level—followed by a brief pointless staring contest. Creave looked away first.

"...Is it really true..."

"That's what I'VE been saying! And where did this rumor even come from that I'm from Nightmare...?"

"...I don't know that much..."

"See. Mistaken identity or wrong intel—anyway, I'm just here to bring you home."

"...Then mind your own business!"

...Oh, this ungrateful little—

Kane nearly blew a vein internally.

The request said to bring him home 'safely'—if that word hadn't been there, he'd have given him an elbow strike by now.

"My father's way or nothing!... 'if you're my kid, you'd better...'... Just because I'm his child, I'm supposed to follow his values and trot along his preset path to a good school, good company!? I'm sick of it!"

"...Anything else?"

Kane's tone was unchanged—cold.

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

Creave bristled. Kane gave a light shrug.

"Nothing... just... pretty typical, isn't it."

"You're MOCKING me!?"

"Yeah, I'm mocking you."

He said it without a second thought.

"You ran away from the mold—but now you're here fitting perfectly into the mold of a 'typical outlaw', feeling self-satisfied. You're clinging to an organization because you can't make it on your own. How is that different from the 'typical salaryman clinging to his company' you hated? Actually, since they're not bothering anyone else, they're a lot more decent, aren't they. And answer me this: did you actually earn the travel money to get to Mars yourself?"

Creave went silent—a non-answer that confirmed Kane's suspicion was spot-on.

"When all is said and done, you're relying on your dad's money and now on the organization. Someone who can't survive on their own ability can't exactly call themselves an outlaw."

"...I..."

Creave tried to say something but couldn't put it into words.

"And let me tell you the fundamental mistake—I'm just here to bring you back. Whether you run away again after you're home is none of my concern."

This was, in truth, Kane's honest feeling.

A moment of quiet, only the bar noise coming through.

"...I..."

creak...

Creave's murmur was cut off by the sound of the door opening.

"—Sorry to interrupt."

Kane said without turning around.

"Don't mind us..."

The voice from the doorway made Creave's face tighten.

"...Ze...Zenani!?"

Zenan

"Kane Blueriver... wasn't it."

Zenan—the man Creave had called that—stood in the doorway, staring at both of them.

Not especially tall, but his lean build made him look taller than he was. He was far more handsome than your average male idol, but his eyes made his beauty foreboding.

The eyes of someone who had killed before. And who had wanted to again.

From beneath the black longcoat, Kane's eye caught a brief glimpse of a small box on a belt. A Psi-Blade amplifier—the same type as Kane's.

"Not the most dignified pose, being dramatic in a toilet doorway."

Kane's dig was ignored completely.

"—Ship name: Swordbreaker. Affiliation: Nightmare..."

Zenan spoke on calmly.

"The ship name is right. What comes after it is wrong."

He replied, subtly reaching for his Psi-Blade handle under his cloak.

This man— He's dangerous.

Far above the class of the people he'd beaten before.

Kane sensed it intuitively.

"—Ze... Zenan, I—"

Creave started to speak but Zenan raised a hand to silence him easily.

"Not long ago I received interesting intel. Nightmare apparently sent an assassin to kill the boss. Name: Kane Blueriver. Ship: Swordbreaker."

"—I'VE BEEN SAYING IT'S WRONG!"

Kane half-shouted. Zenan calmly replied:

"It doesn't matter either way. Not to me."

"...What does that mean!?"

"My superiors are getting very nervous. In this world, the guilty and the innocent both get punished. Whether you're a Nightmare member or not, the fact remains I have to deal with you."

"...I see... So first you gave the job to small-fry informants, they failed, and now you've come personally."

"Correct."

Zenan slowly drew his Psi-Blade emitter from his pocket.

Vmmm—

A blade of light appeared, 70 to 80 centimeters long.

"You have one of these too... according to the manual, you can duel with these... I've been wanting to try that for a while."

At that, Zenan grinned for the first time.

In an instant—

THWOOM! Kane's Psi-Blade blade extended.

In one continuous motion, he brought it down—

GUSH! Something spurted—just water.

Kane had sliced the water pipe off the washbasin.

"—Tch!"

Blinded by spray, Zenan retreated to outside the door.

In that gap, Kane ran to the opposite wall. No door there—but he'd make one.

The Psi-Blade sang.

A moment later, the blade had carved an irregular doorway through the thin wall.

Kane's read on the situation: Zenan was tough. Probably not unbeatable—but no cakewalk either. He bolted for two reasons.

One: fighting there would drag Creave into it. Two: Zenan's subordinates. Getting shot from an unexpected angle mid-duel would be fatal.

One kick to the cut-out wall. With a heavy thud it toppled outward.

Beyond was darkness and the night air.

He slipped through without hesitation. The whole thing took only seconds.

Kane had emerged into some nameless back alley.

In that instant—a scorching killing intent raked his back.

He twisted sideways—a beam of light seared past where he had been, leaving a small hole in his cloak.

Zenan had fired a Psi-Blade energy shot.

"—He went out the back!"

Zenan's voice behind him. Kane ran blind through the unfamiliar night streets.

—So they did have backup... Damn! Making holes in my cloak—these things are hard to find!

BANG! BANG! Dry shots rang out behind him.

—Guns?—

No drama like in movies, but they'd kill just as dead. On the ground, real bullets had more stopping power than energy beams.

Fortunately, the darkness and his black cloak helped—not a single bullet had hit. But that didn't put his mind at ease.

...Just shoot them blind...

He wanted to fire back, but that would only give away his position. With unknown numbers and strength, it was best not to be reckless.

Bearing the killing intent drilling into his back, Kane kept sprinting.

After more desperate running through twisting alleys—Kane found himself back in a street he'd passed before.

He dove into an unfamiliar alley. That moment—

A blinding light hit him.

Headlights.

"—Ambush!?"

Kane raised his Psi-Blade—but then a familiar voice reached him.

"Get in! Hurry!"

After a moment's hesitation, Kane bolted for the car.

"Hang on."

As he jumped into the passenger seat, she threw the car into reverse.

"Did they have backup!?"

"A car! Get it around!"

The pursuers' voices and several gunshots.

But with a head start, catching up was impossible. Usually.

"—Thank you. For now, consider this my gratitude,"

Kane told the woman behind the wheel.

"Millennium. Milly is fine,"

She answered in the same voice as the phone call.

She looked around the same age as Kane. Red jacket and shoulder-length blonde hair—a striking contrast.

"—I told you! Back off!"

She steered left and right.

"You knew I was being targeted!?"

"I didn't know! After the incident at the bar, Creave found me! Told me someone was being targeted by mistake, and asked if I could do something!"

"—Huh... the kid, huh..."

Kane was faintly impressed.

"Anyway, looks like we managed to lose them."

Milly turned the wheel right. The car emerged into a familiar-looking area. Two parked cars with headlights on—Zenon's men, just getting in.

"OH NO! I turned wrong!"

"FOOL! Drive! Get out of here!"

Milly frantically spun the wheel again.

"—Wait, wait, which way next...?"

"Right! RIGHT!"

"For real!?"

"I DON'T KNOW!"

Stumbling through directions, they somehow found a larger road.

But two sets of headlights in the rearview mirror.

"...Looks like we're being chased for a full car chase..."

The moment Milly muttered that—

Crack. A sharp small sound—tiny circular holes appeared in the front and rear windshields right beside Milly's head. She froze for a moment.

"—They're SHOOTING!"

"...They really ARE trying to kill us..."

"Did you not realize that UNTIL NOW...?"

"AAAH! And this is a RENTAL!"

"GO FASTER!"

"Do you think I'm not trying!?"

She floored the accelerator. But the gap between the two cars was closing, bit by bit.

"—IT'S NO USE! I CAN'T GO FASTER!"

"Fine! Then we FIGHT BACK!"

"You can't HIT anything!"

A gun wouldn't work against the vibration of the car. But—

"Not with a GUN!"

Kane drew his Psi-Blade and opened the passenger door—

SLASH! He cut it clean off at the hinge!

CRASH! CLUNK! The door tumbled noisily into the night road behind them.

"—Tch! They dodged it!"

"AAAAH! What are you DOING to my RENTAL!?"

"It's not yours so who cares!"

"I have to PAY for it!"

"Deal with it!"

"...sob sob sob..."

Even in tears she kept the accelerator down.

But the two cars were still slowly closing the gap.

Kane thought briefly.

"...The back seat isn't doing us any good. There's only the trunk behind anyway."

"NOOOO! Please no please no PLEASE!"

Milly screamed, grasping his meaning. Kane started working anyway.

"...I should never have helped him. Never should have helped..."

She chanted like a mantra. Eventually Kane's work was done.

"Here we go! Rear separation!"

SLASH! The final blow.

Trunk and seats went tumbling into the road with an outrageous noise. And—
GRUNCH. The dull sound of a collision behind them.

"—Damn. Just crashed and stopped. I was hoping for an explosion or a rollover..."

He muttered, then turned to Milly with a bright smile.

"Well, anyway, we escaped somehow. You're welcome."

"SHUT UP!"

She screamed genuinely.

Later that night, Milly walked alone through the neon-lit night streets. The night wind was cold. Her wallet was cold too.

Renting a car—even a cheap rental—cost real money. Her company director had agreed to cover it as a business expense, but not before giving her an earful. On top of that, she'd been told to take a pay cut.

For a first-year on the job, this stung.

"...Helping that guy was the original mistake... when I saw him walking down the street in a cloak without a care in the world, I should have recognized the signs... 'this is someone I should not get involved with'..."

She was still muttering about Kane. Holding a grudge was unavoidable, really.

Still, she needed to get this job done before her boss complained again.

She stopped in front of one particular bar.

If the information she'd gathered earlier was right, Creave would be here.

Milly pushed open the door.

She found Creave quickly—sitting alone in a back booth, absently nursing his glass.

"—Is this seat free?"

"...Oh, it's you. Yeah, sit."

Milly sat across from him and ordered a light cocktail.

"—I got him out safely. Just as you asked."

"—Hmm..."

He gave an indifferent reply—but Milly didn't miss the look of relief that crossed his face.

"But why did you want to help him?"

"—Who knows."

Creave downed his glass in one go and ordered another.

"...I just... didn't want someone getting killed on my account when they had nothing to do with me."

"I see."

Milly sipped her cocktail.

"—So. Are you thinking of going home? Not 'doing whatever your father says'—just going back. The way things are, you're just running. If you stay like this, to your father you'll always be 'that hopeless son'. Not interesting, is it? If you want to be understood, you have to face him head-on and make him see who you are."

She paused, then smiled wryly.

"...I'm not really in a position to be saying this... Organizations are murky places. You might not realize that yet, but once you see it, you can't just leave anymore."

She blushed slightly at her own preachiness.

"...Well... honestly, I'm going to tie a rope around your neck and drag you back no matter what. That's my job. But... 'I brought him home and he ran off again' would leave a bad taste. I'd like you to at least partially accept it yourself."

She took another sip of her cocktail.

Creave had been quiet the whole time.

"—I've been thinking about a lot of things—"

He murmured, then fell silent again.

"—|—"

"Your words don't matter to me."

A voice came suddenly from the side.

Milly jolted up.

She didn't know the name, but Zenan's face was there too—surrounded by five or six men who had appeared from nowhere.

"Right now I'd like to hear from the young lady."

Zenan smiled. At the same moment, several men hauled Milly out of the booth, pinning her arms on both sides.

No one in the bar tried to intervene—they clearly knew who Zenan was.

Creave had a complicated expression, but didn't have the decisiveness to step in.

Dragged out through the bar's back and into the basement parking lot of a nearby abandoned building—two cars parked there with headlights on.

They took her stun gun, pushed her face-up onto a car hood.

"—Where is Kane?"

"I don't know!"

"...You were working with that man. What is Nightmare plan?"

"I'm NOT with Nightmare!"

"—Then it can't be helped..."

Zenan looked down at her with cold eyes.

"If you won't talk quietly, you'll have to have... an unpleasant experience. Five men, one woman. You can imagine what that means."

One man with a nasty grin slowly approached her.

"Wait! WAIT!"

She raised her voice quickly.

"I'm just a detective! I was hired by Creave's father to bring him home!"

The man slowly bent over her.

"I have nothing to do with that Kane person or Nightmare! I helped him that one time because of circumstances!"

The man's arm grabbed her clothes.

"I have PROOF I'm just a detective! Please! Listen!"

"—Proof, you say."

Zenan's quiet murmur finally stopped the man.

"—I'll hear you."

Reluctantly the man moved off her.

Milly let out a tiny breath of relief. Still pinned to the car, but at least immediate danger had passed.

"—My wallet has my detective ID."

"That can be forged easily."

Zenan dismissed it without even checking.

Milly was silent for a moment.

"...Alright... call the number I give you via interstellar comm. It's my detective agency."

And so—with Milly giving the number, Zenan called the agency, and after a tense exchange in which Milly's superior chief gave their confirmation—he also fired her mid-call.

"WAHH! My NEW LIFE! My new life is GONE! The video player loan has FIVE MORE MONTHS!"

"...She's worried about a loan... this woman..."

One of the men muttered with scorn. She snapped back to herself.

"...There! NOW do you believe me!? That I'm just a detective!?"

"...a FORMER detective."

Zenan pointedly used the past tense.

"...sob sob sob sob..."

"Regardless, I now understand you're not with Nightmare."

"—D-don't tell me you're actually going to LET her go, Zenan—"

One man voiced his displeasure. He was probably the type who'd been looking forward to what was coming.

"We showed our faces to that director. If this woman's body turns up somewhere, suspicion falls on us first."

Milly quietly sighed in relief inside.

"...Well then... I'll just be—"

Zenan's hand caught her arm.

"Not so fast. We're not done."

She froze.

"I said 'if the body is FOUND.' We can put her in the bathtub and dissolve her in acid—an old method but a reliable one."

"Just a MOMENT!?"

That was when Zenan acted without warning.

VOOM! The space where he'd just stood was raked by silver light.

The men focused on Milly didn't notice for a moment.

"RUN!"

By the time they turned at Zenan's shout, it was too late.

Beams of light cut through the darkness in rapid succession.

"GAAAH!"

"URGH!?"

Shoulders, knees—each man was precisely shot down and crumpled.

Only Milly remained, and Zenan who had ducked behind a concrete pillar.

"—FREEZE!"

The voice came from the darkness.

"...That guy..."

Zenan murmured.

"Move and I shoot!"

Milly's eyes went wide.

Then from the dark, black cloak wrapped around him, Psi-Blade emitter in hand—Kane appeared.

"Milly! Are you okay!?"

"—More or less! Thanks!"

"You know where Zenan is hiding! Stay off the direct line between him and me, circle around and come to me!"

"—Understood."

Watching the fallen men and the pillar where Zenan hid, Milly made her way to Kane.

"There's a car out front. Let's go."

Without taking his eyes off the men, Kane and Milly backed away. Zenan was at an impasse.

He'd just seen Kane's skill with his own eyes. Hit every man's joint precisely—even accounting for them being dazed, remarkably accurate shooting.

Carelessly jumping from behind the pillar only to get shot wasn't appealing.

If only the fallen men could distract Kane for even a moment—but they just lay there whimpering.

—Dammit! Useless!—

And while Zenan raged internally, the sound of a car engine started.

"—Tch!"

He burst from behind the pillar—too late. By the time he reached the exit, the car was gone without a trace.

"—Tch!"

Another tongue-click. But—

After a moment, he wore a full smile.

"...Wait... there's another move here..."

"I'm safe. Thanks."

Milly said to Kane, looking at the road behind them.

"Well, we helped each other in times of need—so I guess we're even."

"...You say that when you were the one being helped...?"

Kane complained.

"Don't worry about it. A man should have a more generous spirit."

Then Milly said, slipping back to business: 'Doesn't look like anyone's tailing us.'

"Good. —By the way, did you shoot before saying 'freeze'? That's a bit backwards."

"If I came out saying 'freeze' and they just stood there, would they have actually listened?"

"...Well... no..."

"So it's better to drop them first, remove their will to resist, THEN say 'freeze'. Same result from a 'kids fight' or 'adults fight'—the know-how for winning isn't all that different."

After a pause for digesting this, Milly went quiet, then:

"...That's... one way to look at it."

Then Milly's voice suddenly went dark.

"...Oh... I just remembered..."

"What?"

"...My detective agency... they fired me..."

"Ah. Why?"

"...I sort of... accidentally gave away the case details. My director found out and said 'you can't even bring back one runaway?'..."

"I see... well, that's understandable. Ha ha ha."

" 'Ha ha' is NOT acceptable!"

She raised her voice at his completely detached tone.

"...So... in the end, it's YOUR fault for sticking your nose in, and all THIS happened! Don't brush it off with a 'ha ha'!"

"I didn't want to stick my nose in either! THEY decided I was with Nightmare by mistake and chased me themselves! Not my fault!"

"That's YOUR problem!"

"Then you're OUT of the car! You're done!"

"...Fine... the thing is, what exactly do you want me to DO about it?"

Put on the spot, Milly faltered.

"...That's... I mean..."

She crossed her arms, thought, then:

"—I just wanted to complain!"

"...You know..."

"Anyway! Even though I'm out of a job now, I'm seeing this through to the end! Screw it all!"

"—Hey."

Creave froze as the voice came from the side.

Outside his cheap apartment building.

"...Jeike..."

One of the friends he'd been drinking with when Kane showed up. The guy who'd introduced him to the organization.

"What's with the gloomy face?"

He put an arm around Creave's shoulders.

Milly had been taken by Zenan's men right in front of him. He'd watched the whole thing and couldn't do a thing. And then Kane showed up just after and asked him what happened. Creave told him. And Kane had said without hesitation: I'll get her out.

—He, who hadn't even tried to help.

—Kane, who barely knew her, going in without hesitation.

—What Milly and Kane had said.

—And what Zenan and his men did.

He couldn't explain what exactly, but these things weighed on him.

After Jeike pulled beers from the fridge uninvited and settled on the worn couch—

"—What are you going to do about it?"

"What do you mean?"

"—Are you leaving the organization?"

"—Hey!?"

Creave jolted upright.

"...Remember this couch?"

Jeike patted it.

"Shortly after you came to Mars... we all went to a secondhand shop and lifted it..."

"Yeah. Bobby got chased by a dog..."

"Got his rear end bitten."

They both laughed.

"...Those were good times."

A tinge of sadness crossed Creave's smile.

Bobby had gotten arrested, told the police the name of a drug dealer, and been killed by the organization two months ago.

"...I introduced you to the organization and I've regretted it ever since..."

Jeike took a sip of beer.

"I didn't think it would turn into this..."

They were quiet for a moment.

"—Go home."

Jeike murmured very quietly.

Creave blinked. '...What?'

"—You're conflicted, aren't you? That's why I'm saying it. That Kane guy—he's got rumors of being associated with Nightmare following him around just because of you. You're not well-regarded in the organization because of it."

"...I know..."

"That Kane told you to go home too. I think it's the right call. You're on thin ice here."

Creave opened his mouth—then—

Knock. Knock. A knock at the door.

Creave opened it—

His body went rigid.

"What are you so surprised about?"

Zenan said in a quiet voice.

"...Ze—Zenan!..."

Zenan stepped into the room.

"Zenan!?"

Jeike bolted up—ignored. Zenan faced Creave.

"That man—Kane Blueriver—I'm going to kill him."

He unilaterally announced.

"And I need your help with that."

"M-me!?"

"That's right. ...You know, don't you? That suspicion has been cast on you as a possible Nightmare spy. This is a perfect chance to clear yourself. Isn't it?"

"...I..."

Creave averted his eyes.

"Surely you won't say... no?"

"—Zenan!"

It was Jeike who spoke up.

Zenan finally looked at him.

"...Still here? What?"

"...Please... spare him!..."

Jeike spoke up.

Zenan stared at him in silence.

"...He's not the kind of person who could do something like that!... Whether that Kane guy is Nightmare or not..."

"—Enough. Quiet."

Zenan coldly cut off Jeike, then turned back to Creave.

"I have no time for pointless talk."

"But Zenan!"

But Jeike pressed on.

"That's asking Creave to set Kane up to be killed—"

Before he could finish—without turning around, Zenan moved.

VOOM. The low hum of a Psi-Blade.

THUD. Something heavy hitting the floor.

"—AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!?"

Creave's scream followed.

As if it were a signal, Jeike's body—head cleanly severed—toppled over.

"Say it again one more time and you'll regret it."

He said, then turned back to Creave. Creave was no longer screaming.

He stared at Zenan with eyes full of hate.

"—I'll ask again. You'll cooperate, won't you?"

Zenan said, Psi-Blade still glowing in his right hand.

Creave drew a deep breath, then—his voice trembling but clear:

"—No."

"...Something's off..."

Milly had been tilting her head for a while.

The next evening. They were searching the night district for Creave, but five bars in, no luck.

"He's usually at one of these bars by this time... something's definitely wrong."

"Maybe your information is wrong?"

Kane said carelessly as he walked beside her.

"But I actually found him through this same information the last two times."

"Could've just been a homebody day."

"...I tried calling his apartment before we left tonight too. No answer no matter how many times."

"Hmm..."

Kane folded his arms.

"—Actually, maybe asking him is the fastest route."

Kane muttered.

"—Asking who?"

Milly tilted her head. Kane answered casually:

"The guy who's been tailing us for a while now."

"...Oh!?"

She gave a small gasp but—to her credit—didn't look back.

They quietly exchanged a few words, then slipped into a narrow alley.

After a moment—the man peeking around the corner ran straight into Kane waiting for him.

"WHOOAAAA!"

He tried to bolt but Kane grabbed his collar.

"—Oh, it's you."

Kane smiled unpleasantly.

It was the same informant from before.

"Someone you know?"

"Sort of. The guy who badmouthed my cloak then set me up."

"I told you—I'm not buying information from you anymore."

"Oh come on... you'll regret saying that later..."

SMACK. No warning—Kane knocked the informant flat.

"What ARE you doing!?"

"And you can drop the posturing. You weren't tailing us for nothing. You have something to say—say it."

"...A-alright, listen... some organization guy... Zenan, I think? He asked me to pass on a message to you. Said he's got someone called Creave, come to the Hawkeyes Building on Realm Street..."

Kane and Milly exchanged a look.

They left the rental car two blocks from the building.

Lookouts were a given. Getting any closer by car risked being spotted.

The two had almost nothing except a map of the surrounding area. Ideally they'd want floor plans of the building—Canal could find those in a few hours if asked—but they didn't have a few hours.

Abandoned office buildings crowded the area, left untouched since a major recession a decade ago. The only light was starlight.

The target building showed no lights from outside.

Crouching behind abandoned cars and in building shadows, they circled around to the back.

In the narrow back alley: a small iron door, paint long since peeled away, showing rough rust.

"—Locked."

Kane said after rattling the knob several times.

"Well of course... even an abandoned building..."

"I'll slice the knob off."

"Don't!"

Milly stopped him as he reached for his Psi-Blade.

"...Why!?"

"If someone sees the light, what then!? You think slicing everything is the answer!?"

"Then what?"

"Like this."

Milly pulled a hairpin from her hair and started working on the lock.

"You had a hairpin?"

"...these come in handy for all sorts of things... got it..."

Click—Milly turned the knob and the door opened easily.

"...Impressive."

"Thank you."

"Figures everyone has at least one useful skill..."

"...What exactly do you mean by that."

They passed through the door. A short corridor led toward a faint light.

The building's lobby blazed with light—no one visible from their position, but no cover in the lobby either.

"...Problem... we can't just stroll out there..."

"...But we can't stay here forever either..."

Possibly enemies lurking in blind spots.

Half-desperate, Kane decided:

"—Milly. I'll go alone first. Signal when it's clear."

"—What if something happens to you!?"

"...Then run alone."

"...If that happens... who would I sponge off of!?"

"...You know..."

Kane gave her a look.

"Fine. Try not to die, okay."

"—I'll do my best."

He moved toward the lobby, Psi-Blade in hand, blade retracted. Checking the air around him—

Dash!

He burst into the center of the lobby, Psi-Blade raised, spinning around!

Silence.

From Milly's position she could see Kane standing in the center, jaw set, staring at something. Not enemies.

"—What is it?"

After a long silence she couldn't help calling out.

"—Don't come."

A quiet answer.

"What IS it? Are there enemies!?"

"—No enemies..."

"Then what!?"

"Stay there—"

"WHAT IS IT!?"

She dashed out.

The first thing she saw: '5F', written in large red spray paint on a freshly whitewashed section of wall.

Below it: something on the floor.

It took her a moment to understand what it was.

It looked like a dismantled mannequin—but it was real.

"...Creave..."

She didn't need Kane's murmur to tell her. The face with no wounds above the neck, looking this way with an expression of despair and terror frozen on it.

Cut cleanly by a Psi-Blade—no blood, an uncanny unreality to it.

"—So in other words—"

Milly forced herself to speak through the urge to be sick—or was it rage—barely contained.

"...Fifth floor. Come and settle this."

"...Right..."

Kane started moving toward the stairs.

The fifth floor—a vast bright room with curtains drawn to block outside light. Zenan stood there—alone—waiting for them.

"—Good, you came. I half expected you'd run when you saw that."

"...You bastard..."

Kane said in a dry voice.

Milly raised her stun gun. Zenan's satisfied smile.

"Why did you do it!?"

"'Nightmare's suspected assassin' had contact with him. That alone was sufficient reason."

"I told you it's WRONG!"

"—True."

Zenan accepted it flatly.

"...What...!?"

"You're not an organization member. I can smell it."

"...Then WHY!?"

"Organizational reasons—somewhat. But that's irrelevant... I simply wanted to kill you, Kane Blueriver. With my own hands. So I gave you a reason to fight."

"...For THAT!? You killed Creave for THAT useless reason!?"

Milly screamed.

"That's right."

Zenan answered, even smiling.

"This jerk—!"

"Stop! Milly!"

Kane stopped her from raising her gun.

"Why are you stopping me!?"

"There are people behind those curtains—want to get shot to pieces!?"

"...!?"

Milly froze. Zenan smiled with satisfaction.

"So basically you just want to duel with blades."

"That's it."

"...Even if I beat you, afterward those guys come out and go bang. I need to defeat you AND then deal with them."

"That's your luck and skill to deal with. And—you knew this coming in."

"...True..."

Kane gave a wry smile, then turned to Milly.

"Milly. You're done here. Go."

"Not an option,"

Zenan answered for her.

"I won't have you calling the police and ruining everything. Stay here as a witness. And if you try to run—my men behind the curtain will shoot you."

Zenan slowly raised his right hand—Psi-Blade emitter in hand.

"...Shall we begin..."

VOOM! Zenan's Psi-Blade blazed to life.

Kane walked slowly toward him. A few steps from the striking distance, he stopped and activated his own Psi-Blade.

A silent staredown. Then—

"—ATTACK!"

Zenan struck first. SCREEEEEEEE! The two blades clashed with an ear-splitting sound. Simultaneously, Zenan's right foot swept at Kane's.

The timing was perfect.

"—Tch!?"

Kane went with the push rather than resist, using his remaining foot to spring backward. Zenan moved to follow.

Kane fired a Psi-Blade energy shot at Zenan's feet.

"Tch!"

Zenan stumbled—and Kane charged forward, blade re-extended.

—Not good...

Kane was grinding his teeth internally. Zenan was stronger than he'd thought.

Different upbringings—but Zenan's technique was razor-sharp. Kane had the edge in raw power and speed, but couldn't afford to be careless.

And the bigger headache: the men behind the curtain.

Even if Zenan intended to keep his word—the moment Kane looked like winning, they might open fire anyway.

—So then—

Blades clashed again. Kane used the pivot point to attempt an elbow to Zenan's face. Zenan had half-anticipated it and sprang backward.

Advance, retreat, clash. Repeat.

After several rounds, frustration started showing on Zenan's face.

"—What's wrong!? Is that all you've got, Kane!?"

"—Looks pretty desperate to me when you start bluffing!"

"SHUT UP!"

A roar—then a rapid series of slashes. Kane barely held them off.

The precise moment Kane tried to step back—Zenan's blade thrust in!

SCREECH! Kane parried but was sent flying backward, landing hard on the floor.

"—Ugh!"

His breath jammed.

He could see Zenan coming.

In that instant—Kane fired Psi-Blade shots in rapid succession.

"What are you aiming at!?"

Zenan's question was answered by the crash of something shattering—and then darkness.

"—Ah..."

Zenan realized. Kane hadn't aimed at him—he'd targeted the ceiling lights.

Zenan quickly extinguished his own Psi-Blade. In this darkness, it would only mark his position.

—He's running—

The moment that thought crossed his mind:

'AAARRGH!'

'GAAAH!?'

Screams erupted in the darkness.

"—DAMN!"

Kane had gone for the men behind the curtains first—using the sudden darkness.

"LIGHTS! GET THE LIGHTS!"

Zenan shouted irritably—but no one could conveniently produce any light. The men on standby hadn't been given any.

Screams and gunshots in the dark. Then—

Silence.

"Kane!"

Milly's voice echoed.

"Don't shout!"

"Someone ran toward the stairs! It was probably HIM!"

"...WHAT!?"

Kane scrambled up.

"After him!"

They rushed down the stairs and out—but there was no sign of Zenan on the ground floor or outside.

"...He's gone... went upstairs?"

"I saw him. He definitely went down. I'm sure."

Maybe he just retreated quietly. Given his pride, that was hard to believe—but there was no sign of him.

That's when Kane's wristwatch communicator beeped.

"—Kane. It's me."

"What? I'm in the middle of something!"

"The fire movement monitors for Mars show... the Dugore Connection's space fleet has started moving."

"Ignore it! I don't CARE about their fleet right now! I need to deal with Zenan!"

'Zenan?'

'—the assassin I mentioned? If it's that person, he was just communicating near your location with someone in the organization.'

"He was!?"

'Yes. He received an order to urgently return to the spaceport.'

"The spaceport!?"

'Nightmare declared war on the Dugore Connection.'

At the spaceport, Kane processed two departure clearances.

"...You're suddenly telling me to come along now, even though you kept saying stay back...?" Milly said.

"If you stay here alone it's actually MORE dangerous. This way you're safer."

"...How exactly is going to a battle zone 'safer'?"

Kane didn't answer and cleared the way for her to enter her ID.

"...Is there anything I should know... like... you're not actually with Nightmare, are you...?"

Milly asked, not even looking up.

Without turning, Kane simply said: "Albert Von Stargazer can go to hell."

"...Fair enough." She accepted it.

Formalities done, they boarded the shuttle.

At the Phobos satellite port, their shuttle docked under the Swordbreaker.

"Welcome back." Canal's smile greeted both of them.

"...Weird outfit..." Milly muttered, then Kane introduced them. After a brief exchange—

"—Let's go. Canal, where's the fleet gathering?"

"Stellar coordinates 8-5, space coordinates F-0-0. Forming up there."

"Right—"

Before Kane could finish—

CRASH!

A shockwave rocked the Swordbreaker.

"WHAT!?"

"A beam cannon strike! Minor damage! AAAH! We just got the outer hull fixed!"

"Two o'clock! Fifteen ships! Dugore Connection vessels!"

"Circle around Phobos for cover!"

"Understood!"

The Swordbreaker swung around using Phobos as a shield.

The fleet fired no more after the first shot.

"—Kane. Communication from the fleet!"

"Put it through."

The video comm activated, and there he was—

"...Zenan..."

'Kane Blueriver... you came all the way out here... let me return the favor and send you to your grave.'

"Are you insane!? Starting a space battle here will bring patrols flying in immediately!"

Zenan just smiled faintly and cut the comm.

"Kane! The fleet is moving! Heading our way!"

"Get clear of here! We can't fight near the satellite port!"

"Understood!"

The Swordbreaker accelerated.

"Who told me this ship was safe!"

Milly cried.

Neither Kane nor Canal paid her any attention.

"Front—more ships incoming! Fleet size—ten!"

"Is it a patrol!?"

Canal shook her head.

"—No! More Dugore Connection!"

"WHAT NOW!" Milly wailed.

Galveira

The entire Dugore fleet shattered in an instant of light.

"...What just happened...?"

"—She made contact with it..."

Canal said without looking back, her voice grave.

"The 'Nightmare'..."

"—It came!?"

Kane stared into the void on the display.

Zenan's fleet had also gone silent—probably sensing the approach too.

"FINE! I'll take down Zenan AND Nightmare!"

Kane raged half-desperately. But Canal said quietly:

"—Kane... one thing I should tell you... that ship... it's the same as me."

Kane froze for a moment.

"...Meaning... you need to go all-out."

"So that's what you mean."

Kane took a deep breath.

"—Understood! All weapons active! Attack at full strength!"

"Understood!"

Milly had gone silent with a complex expression since Nightmare's name came up.

"Enemy ship identified! 300-meter-class attack vessel—individual name: Galveira."

On the sub-display, a triangular, vaguely organic-formed ship appeared. Then—

'—Long time, Vorfeed.'

A low voice flowed into the Swordbreaker's cockpit.

"That's a forced transmission from it,"

Canal told Kane and Milly, then turned to the comm camera.

"—Long time, Galveira. I didn't think you'd actually use our language."

'My Master's and Durugdigudu's tastes. But what's with YOUR appearance?'

"—My Master's tastes. Never mind that—you came out here alone, what exactly do you think you're going to do? Did you really think you alone could sink me?"

'I'll show you that I can.'

One line—and the comm cut.

"Kane! Take evasive action!"

"—Roger!"

Space flashed with light. Beams from afar struck Phobos. In an instant—

Phobos, Mars's moon, shattered!

'—WHAT!?'

Kane and Milly cried out.

"Explosion shockwave incoming!"

Before Canal finished—

BOOOM!

A shockwave rocked the Swordbreaker.

The Dugore Connection fleet—struck by shrapnel, rocked by shockwave, disabled. The attack craft had been blasted to pieces or flung away.

"—What IS that!?"

"...We were fortunate..."

Canal said with an unreadable smile.

"Galveira is significantly powered down. Even that last shot was barely half its true output."

"...HALF...?"

Kane's forehead beaded with sweat.

"Remember this, Kane. This is what our kind of 'battle' is like."

Sensors briefly went blind from the explosion. Then—

"—Where is it!?"

"I don't know! But—"

Before Canal could finish:

"Psi-Barrier—FULL POWER!"

Kane shouted without reason—just instinct.

"Understood!"

SCRREEEEE!

A jarring sound and impact—the Swordbreaker's Psi-Barrier deflected Galveira's energy shots into the void.

"There it is!"

Galveira had used Phobos's explosion to blind sensors, then closed in fast.

"Barrier off! Begin high-speed maneuvers! Leap-Railgun prep!"

"The barrier!?"

"It's in the same boat! It's shooting on estimation! No lucky hits left!"

"Understood!"

The Swordbreaker wheeled. Galveira—barely ten kilometers away—fired streams of light.

The beams grazed both sides of the Swordbreaker as it dodged. Sensors recovered—Galveira appeared clearly on radar.

"Leap-Railgun—FIRE!"

The magnetically launched rounds detonated at range, scattering miniature spatial-displacement devices.

The devices activated on contact with barriers or obstacles—spatially displacing a 50-meter radius. Anything caught was simply carved away, barrier or not. Avoidance was the only answer.

Galveira accelerated and evaded, then swept around toward the Swordbreaker!

"Canal! Route Psi-Blaster targeting to Milly! Milly—intercept!"

"—Got it!"

Startled, Milly snapped to.

Following Canal's instructions, she fired at Galveira. But it evaded or its barrier deflected everything.

Galveira returned fire past the Swordbreaker's shots.

"Barrier!"

"Understood!"

GRRRR...

The same attack that had wiped out the Dugore fleet slammed into the Swordbreaker's Psi-Barrier—and bounced off harmlessly.

Galveira kept coming despite the failed attack.

"IT'S RAMMING!"

'—That's right—'

Galveira's voice reached Canal's 'ears' alone.

'Vorfeed—dying together with you is no loss.'

"Psi-Barrier up! Leap-Railgun on manual standby!"

Kane ordered.

The next moment—

SCREEEEEEEE!

Swordbreaker's Psi-Barrier and Galveira's Psi-Barrier collided, scattering white plasma into space.

On the external monitor, Galveira's sensor eye filled the screen like a giant single pupil.

Kane pressed the Leap-Railgun trigger.

"Don't! Kane!"

Canal cried.

"At this range, WE'D take damage too!"

SCREEEEEE—

The grinding sound changed. Their two barriers were canceling each other out. In moments there would be nothing between the two ships. Galveira would fire at point-blank range, suicide charge accepted.

"—Timing this wrong... means death..."

Kane murmured, finger on the trigger. A daring smile on his face.

VVVRROOOOM!

The barriers dissolved.

Galveira's gun ports lit up.

"—GO!"

Kane pulled the trigger.

And then—

THUD!

One dull impact—and Galveira was deflected by the Swordbreaker's barrier.

Most of Galveira's rear half had cleanly ceased to exist.

In that last moment, Kane had fired the Leap-Railgun inside his own barrier—directly behind Galveira. The displacement devices scattered in the enclosed space had claimed nearly half of Galveira.

Its barrier gone, Galveira was repelled by the instantly re-established Swordbreaker barrier, trailing fire, drifting through space.

"Finish it! Prepare amplification chips, Canal!"

"Amplification chips away!"

Six chips shot out and held position around the Swordbreaker in a perfect hexagon.

"Psi-Barrier!"

"Understood!"

The barrier touched the chips—they blazed blue-white.

"Plasma Blast—FIRE!"

Dozens of plasma arcs reached from the Swordbreaker's barrier. In perfect curves, every last one struck Galveira!

GROOOOOOOAAAAAN!

A death-cry echoed through space. Though no sound should travel in a vacuum.

"—That's its death rattle—"

Canal murmured very quietly.

Then—a single brilliant flower of light bloomed in space.

"—Now. You're going to explain."

After watching Galveira's end, Milly broke the cockpit's silence.

Uh-oh. Kane and Canal stiffened simultaneously.

"...Ah... well, you see, Milly... actually..."

Kane cleared his throat.

"This ship handles military weapons testing contracts... so..."

"That's right, so all this is confidential—"

"Liar."

Milly watched them with a cool stare.

"...This ship and that thing just now are genuine lost ships."

She said it flat out.

Lost ships—when humanity ventured into the galaxy, no direct contact with aliens was made, but considerable traces of them were found. Submerged ruins of alien civilizations on various planets, remains of clearly non-human life forms. And—lost ships.

No public records of these, supposedly because of their extraordinary combat capability. Technology no human could replicate, packed with super-weapons—no existing ship could match them. If someone possessed one, militaries, organizations, weapons industries would all come running. So records of lost ships simply didn't exist.

"...Come on now Milly, lost ships are just a rumor..."

Canal tried to brazen it out.

"That's right, do you even know what a lost ship actually is?"

Kane joined in.

But Milly caught the single drop of sweat running down Kane's cheek.

"Playing dumb won't work. ...I may just be a 'former' detective, but I've been involved in a case relating to this before. An inertia-canceling system that shouldn't exist, those obscene weapons—Psi-Barrier? Leap-Railgun? There's a limit to how much you can call 'new military hardware'. And especially defeating a giant-monster ship that casually destroyed PHOBOS? No way 'new prototype' covers that!"

A torrent of words—Kane and Canal exchanged glances.

"...Don't tell anyone..."

Kane said reluctantly.

"...It's true... this ship is a lost ship. —But honestly, all I know is I inherited it from my late grandmother. I never got more than that. What's the story between you and that thing just now—I haven't heard a word."

He turned to Canal.

Canal flinched, then:

"...And if I said 'someone is plotting to dominate the galaxy'... would you believe me?"

"I'd make fun of you immediately."

"I'd point and laugh."

Both answered in turn, straight-faced. Canal gave a long sigh.

"...That's what I thought. So... those are enemies from my previous world—the era I was born in. ...That's all I can say for now..."

"—Wait! Are there MORE like that!?"

"—Five more."

"...Canal... did you by any chance... behave badly in your previous world?"

"That is NOT the issue!"

"...For now, that's all I can say. I don't want to put pressure on you. When the time is right to tell you, I'll say so."

With that, neither Kane nor Milly could press further.

Then Canal glanced at the main screen. The Interstellar Police and Space Military had finally arrived—rather late to the party.

"...Star police and space military..."

"...Better late than never, I guess..."

Kane let out a long sigh.

Epilogue

In the aftermath—

The Dugore Connection was devastated through the combined assault from Nightmare and the Interstellar Police's subsequent intervention. The surviving Dugore members described Galveira's combat capabilities, but the Interstellar Police dismissed their accounts entirely. The destruction of Phobos was officially blamed on the Dugore Connection.

The Swordbreaker's record unit retained detailed accounts of everything—but Kane had no intention of volunteering that to defend an organized crime group.

Meanwhile, Kane and Milly were questioned briefly and released without incident. No search was conducted on the Swordbreaker itself. Canal had been playing the role of an ordinary vessel at Deimos—Mars's other moon—while it all played out.

And then—Mars.

"...That'll do it..."

Kane looked around the room and said. He'd come to pick up his luggage left at the hotel. Not much—one trunk case.

Today he was leaving Mars.

—In the end, he hadn't been able to bring Creave home...

Kane gave a light shake of his head, shaking off the heavy feeling.

"—Now then... I need to convince Milly to leave..."

Key in one hand, trunk in the other, Kane headed down to Milly's room on the floor below.

Knock. Knock. The sound of knocking came.

"—Yes?"

Milly answered while stuffing clothes into her trunk. Packing wasn't done yet.

Knock. Knock.

"Yes! ...Didn't he hear me? God, Kane's always so impatient..."

Knock. Knock.

"...I'm coming."

She opened the cheap hotel door.

A familiar face was there. Just not the one she expected.

—

Before the moment's freeze could thaw—

ZAP!

A shock like an electric strike ran through her whole body.

—A stun gun—

Milly's consciousness plunged into darkness.

Kane stopped.

Just before Milly's room.

He quietly set down his bag. Without making a sound, he opened it, and attached the Psi-Blade he pulled from inside.

The room door was open.

A grim foreboding ran through him.

He carefully looked inside.

Luggage scattered all over the room.

And on the wall—written large in red spray paint: 'Rooftop. Waiting five minutes.'

For an instant, the image of Creave's dismembered body flashed through Kane's mind.

"—MILLY!"

Kane was running before he knew it.

"—Knew you'd come. Kane."

Zenan waited for Kane with a smile of madness. In his arms—the limp form of Milly. In his right hand—a drawn Psi-Blade, blade near her neck.

"...So you survived... must be those bad habits of yours..."

"Yes. Facing a monster that could shatter Phobos in one blow—not wasting time fighting that. I retreated to Deimos's satellite port. ...So? What happened to it?"

"I finished it off easy."

"Hoh... impressive."

Zenan took it as a casual boast—he smiled and let it go.

"—Now. Let's get to the point, Kane. I have a request."

"'Die quietly'—right?"

"No—I'll settle for 'drop your weapons'."

"...How generous..."

Kane glanced at his Psi-Blade emitter. Then—

ZAP! He yanked the cord connecting the amplifier at his belt, ripped it off, and tossed it aside.

CLATTER. The amplifier hit the concrete floor with a surprisingly light sound.

Then his bandana and emitter too.

"—Good... now take off your cloak and spin around once. ...You might still have weapons hidden."

"...I don't anymore."

Even as he said it, Kane obediently removed his cloak and turned a full circle.

Zenan nodded with satisfaction—then glanced briefly at Milly in his arms.

That instant—Kane charged toward Zenan!

"What!?"

Zenan instantly flung Milly toward Kane and jumped sideways.

Kane scrambled to catch Milly's body.

Zenan used that moment to fire his Psi-Blade!

"GACK!"

Kane gave a small cry.

The strike had seared clean through Kane's left shoulder.

"...What was that about?"

Zenan circled around to block Kane's retreat toward the stairs.

The two had effectively swapped positions.

"Charging in suddenly... surely you didn't think that would catch me off guard?"

Kane first confirmed Milly's safety. She appeared to be merely unconscious.

He glared at Zenan.

"...YOU... if I hadn't moved when I did, you'd have cut her down right in front of me, wouldn't you!?"

"Hm... you figured that out."

"—So it's not nothing."

Kane gently laid Milly down and slowly closed the gap with Zenan.

—Win or lose in one moment. Miss it, and Kane has no chance.

"—Coming for you... Zenan!"

One shout—and Kane charged.

"...Fool... what do you plan to do without weapons!?"

Zenan held position, Psi-Blade ready.

Just before entering range—Kane dropped low, diving toward Zenan's feet like a tackle.

BAM!

Zenan's kick landed squarely on Kane's shoulder.

Kane rolled. Zenan pursued, Psi-Blade in hand.

"It's over! Kane!"

Light flashed.

CRACK!

The blade of light struck—cleanly through a heart. Zenan's heart.

When he had charged at Zenan—Kane must have picked it up then. In Kane's hand: a Psi-Blade emitter.

The cord still torn from it.

—Impossible...

Zenan's lips moved in the shape of a whisper.

—That was his last moment.

...THUD...

Zenan fell and did not move again.

"—Too bad—"

Kane said, breathing hard, looking down at Zenan.

"...Unlike you, I have something called determination... even without the amplifier, I can manage a trick like this... tiring though..."

CLATTER.

Kane let the Psi-Blade emitter drop.

Now—the battle was finally over.

"Welcome back, Kane, Milly."

Canal welcomed both of them with her usual smile.

Deimos satellite port. The Swordbreaker's cockpit.

"...Whew. What a day. Zenan was still alive, turns out... but I wrapped him up cleanly."

Kane settled into the pilot's seat. Milly took the gunner's seat as before.

"—So where to, Kane?"

"For now, the planet Milly's home is on."

"...That thing about hiring me?"

Milly cut in from the side.

"When exactly did I say THAT!?"

"—About that, Kane. Why not keep her on?"

Canal said.

"...What...!?"

"Excellent! You really get it, Canal!"

"I had Milly thoroughly checked out."

"...Wh... what?"

Milly blinked at Canal's casual remark.

"Her background checks out. And her weapons control—you saw it yourself. No drawbacks to keeping her aboard. Right, Milly?"

"...Haha... ahahahaha..."

Milly gave a strained laugh at Canal's meaningful glance.

"...You're hiding something... aren't you..."

"Women's secrets,"

Canal said with a smile. Milly laughed harder and more strained.

Kane sighed.

"...Fine... whatever..."

Anyway—

"Swordbreaker—GO!"

'UNDERSTOOD!'

Canal and Milly's voices rang out in unison.

"—I see—"

At home, Rail murmured briefly at Kane's report.

'...I'm sorry... I was careless...'

"No... it's fine... I'm hanging up..."

'...Okay...'

After Kane's answer, Rail switched off the communicator.

A long sigh. He went to the cabinet in his room and pulled out a bottle of brandy and a glass.

He opened a vintage bottle and poured generously.

Then—he drank it in one shot without hesitation.

"—Delicious."

Rail wore a broad smile.

"To young Kane who danced so beautifully for me—cheers. ...Really... he performed even better than I expected."

The death of someone called Creave—some nobody from who knows where—didn't even register in his thoughts now.

He had simply combed through a massive missing persons list, found a person with Dugore Connection ties who would serve, and that was that man. He'd never met Creave's father, let alone knew what he looked like.

That's right. He had been the one to tell the Dugore Connection—under a false name—that a man called Kane, sent by Nightmare, was coming to assassinate their boss.

All of it had been his staging.

"...But this finishes the Dugore Connection too. ...Now then... for this work, how much of a bonus will Nightmare give me...?"

Rail murmured and downed his second glass.

—But.

He didn't know. That the scheme he had set in motion this time had changed not only Kane's fate, but Nightmare's as well.

...Ohhhh...ohhhh..n...

That sound always filled the room.

The black-suited man read his final report.

"—We have received word from the agents dispatched that the assassination of Darles Dugore has been carried out. It appears as a traffic accident. With this, the Dugore Connection is practically destroyed. Sending a few agents will secure full control. As for other minor organizations, they are negligible in scale. Effectively, the true power behind the solar system now belongs to us."

"—Is that so—"

Stargazer murmured.

"I leave the cleanup to you. Anything else?"

"That is all for today."

"Understood—you may go."

"Yes, sir."

A polite bow, and the black suit left.

Presently—

"—As you heard,"

Alone in the empty room, Stargazer spoke.

"With this, another step closer... to your wish."

'...But... a problem has arisen...'

The voice came from nowhere—as if the room itself were trembling.

"...Vorfeed... your ancient nemesis... even Galveira was defeated. What do you intend to do, O Spreader of Darkness?"

'...Not yet... not enough...'

The voice groaned.

'...Time... I still need time... but when everything is ready... I will destroy him... along with the world...'

In the room, closer to darkness than anything else, the color of miasma deepened—

Author's Note

— Hajime Kanzaka

*This story is fiction. No actual scientific rigor or laws of physics were consulted.

—Which means I can write whatever nonsense I like and no one can complain!

So, Kanzaka here. Thank you so much for picking up this Lost Universe. This is my second series, this time I tried giving it a sci-fi flavor—how did it sit with you?

With a reading history that went from voracious reading to bizarre mystery to space opera to fantasy, this genre was always one I'd wanted to try writing.

Of course, as those of you who read it will have noticed, this story pretends to be 'SF' but isn't really SF at all.

Still, since some SF-flavored weapons do appear, I'd like to give a quick explanation:

Lasers and missiles: no explanation needed. Rail gun: amazing weapon, hurts when it hits. Beam cannon: amazing weapon, flashy visuals.

Regarding the faster-than-light method I made up for this story: 'phase-transition navigation.' Since it applies human mental energy physically, you can interpret it as 'if you put your soul into it, the speed of light is nothing navigation.' As for the electromagnetic barrier: 'Oh, it's a barrier.'

Also—even though faster-than-light travel takes days, communications are nearly real-time. This is what is commonly known as 'plot convenience.'

In-story currency: one credit = roughly 1,000 yen. The commissions sound cheap! But this era's propulsion and spacecraft costs have dropped massively. Even now, with only decades of oil left, gasoline is cheaper than good drinking water—so spacecraft fuel has probably become cheap too. Probably.

As for the main character Kane's cloak—that's just the author's personal taste. No plot significance. Think of Luke at the start of Return of the Jedi.

...The author has been looking for a cloak himself but can't find one at department stores or men's clothing shops. Figures, I suppose.

This Lost Universe series will probably run to five volumes at most. The number of enemies is clearly stated. We'll see!

Next volume: Lost Universe Vol. 2. Honestly, no idea what it'll be yet. Please write whenever you can!

Until we meet again.

— End of Author's Note —

ロストユニバース①

幻夢 目覚める

「これで斬り合いをやってみたかったのさ」
ゼナンは不気味な笑みを浮かべた……





「やめてお願いぶりっ、」
ミリーの絶叫を無視して、
ケインはサイフレッドを振るって、
「ゆくぞっ、後部分離っ、」

……お……お……お……お……お……ん……
逆五紡星の中心に
黒いマントの男が行んでいた……





















